JUNE 7, 2019

Forbes

Wines Of The Week:

Champagne Palmer & Co. 2003 And Chateau Montelena 2005

BY BRIAN FREEDMAN

Chateau Montelena, one of the icons of Napa, now offers customers back-vintages to enjoy alongside more current releases (Credit: Courtesy of Chateau Montelena).

I've consulted on enough clients' cellars over the years to know that one of the single biggest problems that collectors encounter is waiting too long to start opening up their prized bottles. In that regard, I often feel like some sort of vinous Grim Reaper, bearing the bad news that significant parts of a collection should have been opened up and enjoyed—or sold—years ago. Wine, after all, doesn't last forever (great Madeira often excepted), and even the best bottles will inevitably fade and ultimately die if they're aged for too long.

But when an older vintage is perfectly mature yet not over-aged, the rewards can be phenomenal.

This past week, I tasted two wines that embody the benefits of patience, and that are absolutely ready to be savored—and then savored some more—right now . . . though with plenty of aging potential left.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

My white Wine of the Week actually just arrived in the United States, and will be available in the coming weeks—not that all that much will be found. But the Champagne Palmer Grands Terroirs 2003, of which only 1,703 magnums were produced, is well worth the effort to locate.

2003 is remembered as the heat-wave vintage, and in France, wines from regions all over the country are to this day generally marked by the extreme weather of the summer that year. In many regions, alcohol levels were elevated, fruit ripeness was pronounced, and in some parts of the country, there was a tendency for the wines to taste more like the extreme character of the vintage than the places they were grown. It was a controversial year, to be sure, and in general, my experience with them has, over the years, left me fairly ambivalent. (With some exceptions, of course.)

But the Grands Terroirs 2003 has somehow managed to avoid that fate. In fact, for all of the richness of the wine—early-season frost reduced the crop by upwards of 40% before the heat arrived, concentrating the juice and lending it a lovely tropical note all these years later—there is a real sense of energy, of liveliness, that is irresistible. Aromas of gunpowder, kumquat, baked apples, and dried pineapples follow through to the palate where they are joined by honey tuille, mashed almonds, sesame paste, persimmons, and orange pith. This has another decade or more left to go, especially as it's a magnum, but I'd have a hard time holding onto it for that long: It's excellent right now.

Interestingly, it wasn't always a foregone conclusion that this wine would come around. The plan was to release it five years ago, but the Palmer team's blind tastings kept on showing that it just wasn't ready: Wine is as much an art as a science, and in this case, plans had to take a back seat to the inherent fickleness of the wine itself. But then, two years ago, it had finally shrugged off its youthful reticence, and was ready to be disgorged. The result of that patience is a wine that bucks the trend of the vintage, and that proves that, in the best cases, patience can be rewarded tremendously. It's stunning.

My red Wine of the Week, the Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2005, is part of a program that the iconic producer is offering: For each new vintage that Montelena releases, they also will be making available bottles of the vintage from a decade before. It's a great opportunity to taste both a youthful, newly released wine as well as one that's been perfectly stored in the intervening ten years.

I recently tasted both the current release 2015—which is excellent, the plum and spice cake aromas lifted by flowers, cedar, and spearmint, the mineral-driven flavors of currants, blackberries, cedar, and spice wonderfully concentrated—and the 2005. The older of pair is in such a terrific place right now that it's my red Wine of the Week.

It has just the slightest amount of bricking at the edges, as would be expected of a 14-year-old wine, but otherwise this shows remarkable consistency and density of color. Aromatically it's just beguiling: Notes of cigar humidor, pencil shavings, currants, dried flowers, and mint flutter by with each passing minute. They turn to flavors of red and black currants, mixed mountain berries, Chinese five-spice powder, cinnamon stick, violets, lavender, and a distinct herbal tone that carries through it all and lends a shimmering sense of freshness. This is a wine at its peak, but with years left to go.

Waiting too long to open a favorite wine is a risk that all collectors face. I've fallen into that trap with plenty of bottles in my cellar. But when the producer does all the aging for you? Problem solved. These two Wines of the Week embody that brilliantly.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Chateau Montelena Estate Cabernet Sauvignon 2005

Just the slightest amount of bricking at the edges, but otherwise this shows remarkable consistency and density of color. Aromatically it's beyond transporting: Notes of cigar humidor, pencil shavings, currants, dried flowers, and mint flutter by with each passing minute, and turn to flavors of red and black currants, mixed mountain berries, Chinese five-spice powder, cinnamon stick, violets, lavender, and a distinct herbal tone that carries through it all and lends it a shimmering sense of freshness. This is a wine at its peak, but with years left to go. Still, I'd have a hard time waiting: It's that delicious right now.